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“... But You Don't Know Me Like the Sun; You've Never Seen My Horizon” (Bennett, Cole, Segal, and Warner, 2015, Track 3): Exploring the Invisibility of a Hyper-Visible Black Woman in Education

JaNae' Alfred  
janae\_alfred15@yahoo.com

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“...But You Don’t Know Me Like the Sun; You’ve Never Seen My Horizon”  
(Bennett, Cole, Segal, and Warner, 2015, Track 3):  
Exploring the Invisibility of a Hyper-Visible Black Woman in Education

JaNae’ L. Alfred  
M.Ed., Educational Administration, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2012  
M.Ed., Elementary Education, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2011  
B.S., Elementary Education, Harris-Stowe State University, 2008

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Advisory Committee

Matthew D. Davis, Ph. D.  
Chairperson

Thomasina Hassler, Ph. D.

Carl Hoagland, Ed. D.

Thomas Hoerr, Ph. D.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. I have been blessed with the best pair on the planet. All of their sacrifice, love, and support have shaped me to be the person I am and helped me learn that anything is possible. My mother has provided me with encouragement, prayer, wisdom, and a shoulder to cry on. My father has pushed me to remain “creative” as I problem solve and face my problems head on. Together, they have provided me with structure, discipline, and have given me more hope than should be allowed for one human being to experience. I am eternally grateful for EVERYTHING I have been able to experience under your watchful and loving eyes. Thank you, Stephanie and Demetris “Al” Alfred.

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Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends. My village is strong and mighty. I am so blessed to have so many people in my corner. You are my cheat code to life. All of you have contributed to this dissertation in your own little way. From your advice, ideas, and well-needed breaks, I am forever grateful. This is OUR dissertation. We are now doctors! I love you!

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation is entitled “... But You Don’t Know Me Like the Sun; You’ve Never Seen My Horizon,” (Bennett, Cole, Segal, and Warner, 2015) because this line represents the intense feeling I experience as a Black woman in America. I often feel like decisions are made about me before others get to know me. In finding my own space in the world, I have found solace and peace in music. This line comes from the song entitled “Warm Enough,” performed by Nico “Donnie Trumpet” Segal, Chancelor “Chance the Rapper” Bennett, Jermaine Lamar “J. Cole” Cole, and Fatima “NoName” Warner. This is one of the most perfect songs with four of my favorite artists that have given me an auditory playground to escape to in times of trouble, stress, and harm. This line is especially impactful because it is sang by NoName, who is a Black female rapper whom, I assume, experiences similar issues as she navigates the world. When searching for a title, my advisor, Dr. Matthew Davis suggested listening to my music to find some inspiration. Under his direction, I hit the jackpot!

I would like to acknowledge my committee members- Dr. Thomasina Hassler, Ph. D., Dr. Carl Hoagland, Ed. D., and Dr. Thomas Hoerr, Ph. D. Thank you for all of your feedback, patience, and understanding. I have learned a lot from you all and you have challenged my way of thinking. Through working with you I have gained confidence as a writer and a scholar.

I would like to give a special thank you to my committee chairperson and advisor, Dr. Matthew D. Davis, Ph. D. We have learned and grown together and I

would not have it any other way. We have pushed each other in ways I do not think either of us expected and I am forever grateful for it all. From pressure comes diamonds and I believe we have created a beautiful gem!

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of my educational leaders. Until this year, all of my principals have been Black women. From them, I have learned so much. Through tough times, political correctness, moments of vulnerability, and continuous support, I have learned how to navigate my crooked room. I am thankful to have been able to have each of them add a little bit of flavor to my pot of leadership gumbo. We have all had to navigate some interesting spaces, and while we may not have always agreed, I have always felt completely supported by my sister supervisors. You have all inspired me in different ways. I thank you all for taking a chance on a girl like me and continuing to challenge the status quo. This is for you!

## **Abstract**

As a Black woman in the field of education, I feel as if I am not valued or seen as an equal member of the institution. This has been extremely evident as I served as an Instructional Coach in a predominately Black public school district where the teachers and administrators were predominately White. Race has come to the forefront as a prominent barrier for effective Instructional Coaching across the color line. In this dissertation, I reflect on my experiences as an Instructional Coach and analyze them through the lens of Critical Race Theory using autoethnography as a research method. My findings dive deeper into the invisibility and hypervisibility of being a lonely Black woman in the field of education as I serve as a pseudo supervisor. This is exhibited in three cornerstone counterstories- Duties, Copies, and Bathrooms: The Role of the Professional Mammy, Slumber Parties with the Principal, and Fighting for Stagnant Mobility: Working Twice as hard for Half as Much. Melissa Harris-Perry's *Crooked Room Theory* and Joy DeGruy's *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* are used to support the notion of changing one's self to fit into a societal structure that does not welcome Black women. Like many Black women in professional settings, I have had to shift and cope to survive in an environment that does not recognize Black people as colleagues and uphold the Racial Contract. This dissertation exposes my raw thoughts and feelings as I was professionally discriminated against due to race and gender. I share some self-care suggestions, and find solace among family and friends as I navigate my crooked room.

## **Key Words and Definitions**

***Autoethnography***-autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation, (Chang, 2008).

***Citizenship***-membership in a body politic, a nation, and a community, (Harris-Perry, 2011).

***Critical Race Theory (CRT)***-the notion that racism is “normal, not aberrant, in American society” and departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling, (Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings, 2009).

***Crooked Room***-the idea that Black women are so defined by stereotypes that it is extremely difficult for them to orient themselves in political discourse, (Harris-Perry, 2011).

***Instructional Coach***-individuals who are full-time professional developers, on-site in schools, (Knight, 2007).

***Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)***-posits that centuries of slavery in the United States, followed by systemic and structural racism and oppression have resulted in multigenerational maladaptive behaviors, which originated as survival strategies, (DeGruy, 2005).

***Racial Contract***-a tacit agreement among members of the tribes of Europe to assert, promote, and maintain the ideal of White supremacy as against all other tribes of the world, (Mills, 1997).

***Shifting***-a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society, (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

One bright and sunny Wednesday, I arrived at work with a smile on my face and a spring in my step. I had been out of my school building for the previous two days at professional development meetings and was excited about sharing my new learning with my colleagues. I opened the door to my office to find my work best friend and the only Black woman teacher on staff sitting at the table with a somber look on her face. A cloud shifted over the sun and cast a dark shadow through the only window in the office. She said, "Good morning. I have to share something with you. It's not pleasant, and I don't want to get your day started on a negative note, but you need to see this." She handed a wad of paper to me. I sat down at my desk and unfolded what appeared to be an official agenda from our school's Building Improvement Committee (BIC) meeting that occurred that morning before school. Item number six on the agenda read: Concerns About the Instructional Coach Position. Under the heading, there were six bullet points questioning my position, my duties, my responsibilities, claiming that I was refusing to work with teachers, requesting a copy of my job description, and questioning why I had my curtains on my office door window closed, as it made my office "unwelcoming and uninviting." My heart sank. My face got hot. This was not just some agenda item; this was about me. This was an attack on my ability to be a good coach. I was being picked apart like an inanimate object. The claims the committee members were making were not only false, they were just plain mean. I was shocked because I thought I was doing a great job as an instructional coach in my building. I was

keeping my colleagues informed, attending 2-3 professional development opportunities per week, and establishing good relationships with administrators as I connected them with teachers in my building. I was upset, confused, and hurt by my colleagues' actions because I had been working harder than I ever had before, and they were claiming that I had not been doing anything at all. In fact, they even felt the need to check in on me by demanding I keep the curtains on the office door opened at all times and send out a weekly record of my activities and meetings, even though I reported out my new learning at our bi-weekly faculty meetings. This was the most ridiculous request of them all because teachers have neither the right nor the authority to mandate or require an employee to report their whereabouts or how to regulate their office space. The curtains were installed to protect the very people who were accusing me of being ineffective. The few coaching conversations I had the opportunity to facilitate required the teachers to become very reflective without interruption. The curtains allowed this to happen without interruption from students and colleagues as we looked at data and lesson plans. The daily log of my whereabouts was ridiculous because teachers have no direct impact on my attendance or evaluation. My principal (supervisor) was well aware of where I was, when I was out, and what I was doing. I did not owe anyone else this information. This attack on my professionalism caused my mind to wander. Would they feel this way about me if I were white? If I looked like my co-workers, would they welcome me into their classrooms? If I watched a few episodes of Friends, or knew all of the words to Sweet Caroline would we be able to laugh together in the lounge? Would my degrees hold more social clout if I had not gone to a Historically Black College for

undergraduate school? This assumption of me not working, lack of trust, and new level of policing proved to me one thing: my colleagues did not want me as their coach.

This message to me was very confusing. A group of white teachers, working in the building, hired me. They expressed how excited they were to be working with me and appreciated how knowledgeable I was about pedagogy, diversity, and collaboration. I was highly recommended by District officials due to my previous students' standardized test scores. I had a good reputation among my colleagues, as I was a District level union representative and was used to collaborating with teachers and voicing their concerns to administration. I also served on many professional development committees, which kept me in the loop about new instructional practices and curriculum. Some of the teachers even told me they were glad to be working with me and that I was the best choice for the position. In addition to the teacher support I was receiving, my principal and I asked for and used teacher input when designing my schedule and daily routines to ensure that I was an asset to them and their instructional practices. I was their first instructional coach and my qualifications matched my reputation, but after we got comfortable in our setting, things changed. The whispers increased, the collaboration decreased, and the questioning commenced. My Black body was an invasion of their White space. According to Charles W. Mills (1997):

In America, South Africa, and elsewhere, the White space is patrolled for dark intruders, whose very presence, independently of what they may or may not do, is a blot on the reassuring civilized Whiteness of the home space (p. 48).

While the idea of my position and me were enticing, when the rubber met the road, I was just a stranger trespassing into educational crime scenes as children of color were harmed. Gillborn (2009) found “the English education system appears to be a clear case where the routine assumptions that structure the system encode a deep privileging of White students and, in particular, the legitimization, defense and extension of Black inequity” (p. 62).

As a Black woman working in the education field I have walked a very lonely road. I have spent the majority of my career teaching elementary school-aged students in a general classroom setting. Year after year I have called White teachers my colleagues. I have witnessed, intervened, and endured verbal abuse, embarrassment, and degradation within the walls of the schoolhouse. I have had to put myself on the line for the safety and dignity of children of color my entire career. I am often one of few, if not the only, Black educators in the schools I have worked in over the years. Being the only or one of few makes me hyper-visible. I am the only one who stands out. I become the automatic resource for anything related to Black people. At the same time, I become invisible. Because I am Black, I am not afforded the same empathy as my white co-workers. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), the concept of Salient Objects comes into play, as it describes how the most noticeable person in the room is examined closely and negatively, causing heightened pressure to perform in a stellar fashion while being evaluated more harshly (p. 156). At times I have had to sacrifice my beliefs for the sake of keeping my job because it is such common practice to devalue students of color. I was lonely as I fought to show the inequities in our school that were

harming our students. After years of working with and protecting children, I had finally had enough. I was tired, frustrated, and angry at a system that falsely advertised its self to families of color. It was a harmful environment that set Black children up for failure. In an educational system where what is viewed as truth only exists within White culture, language, history, and space, Black communities are left searching for resources to substantiate the subjective essence of their experience (Leigh and Davis, 2015, p. 6).

Though my spirits were broken and my loneliness started to overwhelm my teaching, my passion for the protection of kids, especially those of color, still burned strong. I decided I would focus my attention on teachers' behaviors instead of students' reactions and outcomes. I realized that I could impact more students of color if I worked with teachers to help them to learn how to value, relate to, and care for Black and Brown children. I was presented with the opportunity to work as an instructional coach (IC) in an elementary school setting. An instructional coach is someone whose chief professional responsibility is to bring evidence-based practices into classrooms by working with teachers and other school leaders, (Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching, 2017). In some aspects, the IC works as a liaison between teachers and administration, while in other ways, they are an in-house professional developer. The IC is not an administrator and does not have the authority to reprimand employees. They can only guide teachers down the path of professional development. Knight (2007) says "the IC collaborates with the teachers so they can choose and implement research-based interventions to help students learn more effectively" (p. 13). This makes the IC a bit of a pseudo-

supervisor, requiring them to have similar responsibilities of an administrator without the power, title, or paycheck.

Most coaching programs fall under one of three models: Partnership, Cognitive, and Transformational. Partnership coaching requires ICs, and teachers to see each other as equals. Partnership, at its core, is a deep belief that we are no more important than those with whom we work, and that we should do everything we can to respect that equity (Knight, 2007). Cognitive coaching, conversely, is more reflective in nature as the IC is required to guide the teacher down the path of reflection in search of their own answers and solutions to their problems. According to Costa and Garmston (2002) “cognitive coaching holds that internal forces rather than overt behaviors influence a person’s actions. Therefore, Cognitive coaches focus on the thought processes, values, and beliefs that motivate, guide, influence, and give rise to the overt behaviors...” (p. 13). Transformational coaching attempts to examine internal and external factors that may affect teaching and learning and leads teachers down a path to dealing with what is within their realm of control (Aguilar, 2013). A transformational coach works to surface the connections between three domains individual client’s behaviors, beliefs, and being; the institutions and systems; and the broader educational and social systems in which we live, to leverage change between them, and to intentionally direct our efforts so that the impact we have on an individual will reverberate on other levels (Aguilar, 2013). All are structured in such a way that sessions and/or cycles are one-on-one, and requires the coach and teacher to have a very close relationship built on trust. I work closely with teachers and students on implementing research-

based instructional and learning strategies to increase the achievement levels of children and the instructional practices of teachers, as measured by their evaluations conducted by the principal. This means teachers have to be comfortable enough to come to me with their areas of weakness and be open enough to request and/or accept my assistance, all while maintaining confidentiality. Trust is the cornerstone of any instructional coaching program. Aguilar (2013) states:

There is no coaching without trust. A teacher or principal will not reveal the areas that she's struggling in, or share beliefs that might be holding her back, until she absolutely trusts you; trust defines a coaching relationship. It takes time to build, and once it has been developed, it should not be taken for granted (p. 40).

In real time, being an IC is much more complicated than handing out tips and quick fixes to teachers and going to meetings. Schools can never have enough support, so I find myself wearing many different professional hats on a daily basis. If someone calls in sick, I may have to reschedule a coaching session to cover a lunch duty, monitor recess, or even substitute teach in a classroom. The IC is often the first person pulled because she is most often a certified teacher, whom is familiar with the building culture and dynamic, and is not responsible for any single set of students. She may also be pulled into planning sessions with administrators or curriculum leaders because she has a general idea of what every grade level in the building is working on because she works with all of the teachers in some capacity. In addition to the daily 'ins and outs' of a school building, ICs have to attend professional development sessions regularly to remain current on best

practices and school district initiatives. They must also sharpen their skills as coaches by meeting regularly with their coaching cohort or mentor (depending on the program model). This means the IC is pulled in many different directions, making trust difficult to achieve.

As an IC, I have had to spend a lot of time proving myself to my colleagues. Most of the teachers I work with are not open to the idea of having a coach or being coached through their lessons. They are not ready to be vulnerable enough to share and willing to open their practice. I often find myself walking a fine line of teacher and administrator, which makes my colleagues increasingly uncomfortable. In addition to this, I also experience issues across the color line. I receive the most resistance from my white colleagues as I navigated through a collegial minefield of microaggressions. Derald Wing Sue (2007), and his colleagues define racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). My first few weeks in my role were excruciating. The requests from teachers to work with me were far and few in between. Teachers whispered about me in the hallways and the teacher’s lounge. An eerie hush fell over any occupied room when I entered. When a white teacher was comfortable enough to strike up a conversation with me, it was more like a job interview. Instead of asking me what I did over the weekend, discussing current events, or even chatting about petty pop culture gossip, I was asked questions like: “Where did you get your degree from again?” “Just how many degrees do you have?” and “Do you have to have an administrative



certification to do your job?" Some even vented to me about me, saying things like "No offense, but I really don't know why we need you in this position," and "We should have gotten a reading specialist or a few more aides around here." Since I was charged with the specific task of improving instructional practices as measured by benchmark tests and teacher evaluations, I had to force my colleagues to work with me by putting them all on a schedule and observing their practices. Even with my mandated presence, I was still being treated like a fly on the wall. Teachers did not engage me in conversation or collaborate with me. With all of the resistance I had endured on a daily basis, I have come to the conclusion that coaching across the color line may be nearly impossible. I learned that I was being tolerated and not accepted. Tate (2014) says, "...tolerance always points to that which cannot be tolerated, that which is the focus of disgust or contempt. Therefore, on entry to institutions, those who 'cannot be tolerated' must be controlled through words, actions, policies, bureaucracy, and negative affect" (p. 2480). My colleagues were not accepting me because they simply did not view me as their colleague.

When establishing professional relationships with colleagues, you have to be able to be, at least, seen. Most of my White female colleagues refuse to view me as a professional. According to Tate (2013)

White colleagues continue to have problems being collegial. They have 'bad feelings' if one steps outside of 'the natural space of blackness' into what is seen as the (white) sphere of influence in academic life. These statements can be made because of daily black experiences in academic institutions in which racial inequality is the norm and where being a 'colleague' or experiencing

collegiality are an (im)possibility because of the racial contract (p. 2479).

The requests I get from them most frequently have very little to do with instruction, education, or children. Many see my position as a glorified aide. I get asked to make copies, order books and supplies, and (most often) to relieve the teachers for a restroom break. These frivolous requests diminish my position one step above errand girl and prove to me that I am not an equal, not important, and not worthy of their time. They do not value me, or the skill set I have to offer simply because they do not trust me as a Black person. Tate (2013) says, "It is assumed that you *should* leave being Black behind in order to be accepted as a colleague... Black women and men are required to alienate themselves from themselves as they enter the gates" (p. 2478). Since I have decided to take the road less traveled for the sake of children of color, by standing proud in my Blackness and encouraging the students to do the same, I am left colleague less. "Colleague seems to imply equality of standing... being a 'colleague' or experiencing collegiality are an (im)possibility because of the racial contract" (Tate, 2013, p. 2479). The racial contract, which according to Mills (1997), "is a tacit agreement among members of the tribes of Europe to assert, promote, and maintain the ideal of White supremacy as against all other tribes of the world," is exactly what empowers my coworkers in policing my work and calling shots that are out of their league. White colleagues continue to have problems being collegial. Becoming a resource for White teachers and possessing the authority by at least job description to guide their teaching practices threatening the racial contract means I am stepping out of the natural state of Blackness, (Tate 2013).

As Whites continue to maintain racial contract people of color suffer from historical trauma. Sotero (2006) says, “historical trauma theory ...is that populations historically subjected to long-term, mass trauma—colonialism, slavery, war, genocide— exhibit a higher prevalence of disease even several generations after the original trauma occurred” (p. 1). As I walk through the hallways of my school, I observe the micro-aggressions inflicted on students as teachers force-feed their morals and values upon their students, in an attempt to assimilate them. I cringe as I am belittled and questioned in front of my coworkers and parent population I serve. I become exhausted as I fight another battle for the Black lady with three degrees being asked to run off a quick copy while I use the bathroom, but all of this is done (both consciously and unconsciously) to maintain the racial contract to keep me in my place. As stated by Leigh and Davis (2015), “generational acts of harm such as slavery, segregation, and racism manifest into the dominant narrative of society and are marketed as markers of change when in fact, they persist the cycle separatedness and trauma” (p. 4).

In this dissertation, I will reflect upon my experiences as an instructional coach. I will analyze the instructional coaching model through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and reveal the barriers that exist within the structure as coaching opportunities occur across the color line. Ladson-Billings (2009) states, “CRT begins with the notion that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society, and because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” (p. 21). As a Black instructional coach, my encounters with white teachers force me to face racism head on. CRT will

provide me with the language and context to explain and analyze my interactions across the color line. I will also use storytelling to support my findings. Ladson-Billings (2009) says, “stories provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting” (p. 23). My findings will be shared in three counter-stories, which will illuminate how CRT has shaped my thinking about instructional coaching and highlight my invisibility, while remaining hyper-visible.

My experiences will be recorded in a journal and reflected upon through the format of autoethnography. According to Chang (2008), “autoethnography combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details” (p. 43). I will specifically be writing an ethnic autoethnography, which Chang (2008) states is “a personal narrative written by members of ethnic minority groups” (p. 33). I will explore my options as a Black woman by becoming an engaged witness in the education field as I attempt to help liberate students of color as they navigate their educational experience. According to Leigh and Davis (2015), “engaged witnessing requires critical empathy along with four other qualities: (a) studying the historical context; (b) exploring multiple subject positions (including the student); (c) testing the possibilities and limits of representation; and (d) utilizing emotion as a source for knowledge” (p. 13). I will also hone in on some strategies for self-care, as working within the race contract can be harmful. My goal is to prevent the effects of post-traumatic slave syndrome towards myself and examine some ways out. Degruy (2005) states,

Post-traumatic slave syndrome challenges patterns of dissonance in academia by applying historical trauma specifically to Black communities,

connecting the effects of slavery and oppression to the diagnostic criteria of PTSS... Post-traumatic slave syndrome frames acts to voice traumatic experiences in the Black community as truths while it also attempts to provide opportunities for healing.

This healing process will expose my innermost thoughts and feelings as I interact with my coworkers and students. I will also examine some ways to build trust among my coworkers as I strive for collegiality. The following research question will guide this study: In what ways can I, as a Black female instructional coach, protect myself from harm and loneliness in a predominately White professional environment?

While I know I may never truly be seen as an equal, I at least want to validate my position to the degree where I can do meaningful work. If I cannot change the minds of the adults, I can at least be a voice for the students of color they serve. I want to maintain my Blackness while working with my White coworkers and liberating the students in which they teach. I want to feel good about the work I am doing.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Instructional Coaching**

Over the span of my ten-year career, I have noticed that instructional coaching has become more popular in public education, at least in the St. Louis County area. With the residual effects of high-stakes standardized testing, many public school districts have sought out new methods of professional learning and developing their teachers to have a more powerful impact on students and their achievement levels. Instructional coaching, in many places, has become that vehicle. According to Knight (2007) "For better or worse, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has turned the nation's attention to the way teachers teach and students learn, and schools everywhere are searching for proven ways to improve students' scores and to help their schools achieve Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)" (p. 1). The framework of instructional coaching is used to reinforce consistent and efficient professional development opportunities to teachers and other educators by revisiting learning targets repeatedly, creating and critiquing an action plan, and reflecting on the process. This is important because, traditionally, one-shot professional development opportunities have a low retention and success rate. Knight (2007) says, "the old model of an expert talking to a room full of strangers is in some cases literally worse than nothing, leaving teachers frustrated, disappointed, insulted – feeling worse off than before the session" (p. 2). Instructional coaches differentiate and personalize professional development for educators by facilitating coaching cycles in which the client sets a specific goal or learning target and the coach guides the process through coaching conversations

and strategic questioning. Aguilar (2013) says, “coaching is an embedded support that attempts to respond to student and teacher needs in ongoing, consistent, dedicated ways” (p. 9).

According to Aguilar (2013), there are three different types of instructional coaching: directive (also called instructive), facilitative, and transformational. The focus of directive coaching is changing the behavior of the client. Facilitative coaching scaffolds the instruction of the client to address their way of thinking. Transformational coaching seeks out connections between the client, institutions, and social systems (p. 21-25). All frameworks of instructional coaching are deeply rooted in building collaborative relationships between the coach and the client.

Though coaching is used to support teachers, there are some flaws in the framework that can hinder the process. One issue with coaching is the lack of training and professional preparation for the position. The potential for coaching within the education system has yet to be reached... in most schools and districts, there is no formal pathway for entering the coaching role. The majority of coaches were strong teachers who demonstrated mastery of content and pedagogy and who were encouraged or self-selected, to pursue coaching, (Aguilar, 2013). This was the case for me. I was considered a lead teacher with strong behavior management and impressive interpersonal skills. My students’ test scores were high, my class was under control, and people seemed to like me. This made me a viable candidate to become an instructional coach. My training included numerous one-shot sessions on curriculum, pedagogy, presenting, and collaborating. The presenters were often inconsistent and professional development topics were not cohesive. The most

consistent part of our training was our cohort of coaches and our supervisor, who set up our professional development opportunities. One thing I quickly learned about instructional coaching is that it is multifaceted and requires a great deal of trust. No amount of training, professional development, or book reading can build trust among colleagues; it is developed organically over time. Costa and Garmston (2002) state the following about trust:

People report behaviors that are strongly consistent with research on the subject. Among the factors mentioned are maintain confidentiality, being visible and accessible, behaving consistently, keeping commitments, sharing personal information about out-of-school activities, revealing feelings, expressing personal interests in other people, acting nonjudgmentally, listening reflectively, admitting mistakes, and demonstrating professional knowledge and skills. Trust grows strong as long as these behaviors continues, but can be seriously damaged when someone is discourteous or disrespectful, makes value judgments, overreacts, acts arbitrarily, threatens, or is personally insensitive to another person (p. 96-97).

All three instructional coaching models, which can be used interchangeably, are centered on trust. Nunnally (2012), defines trust as, “a belief about a person, institution, or context that stems from an assessment about who or what can deliver an outcome with the least harmful risk and with the greatest benefit to the trustor” (p. 24). Coaches and clients have to participate in a give-and-take process that requires them to build relationships and share their beliefs and values. Coaches encourage us to explore our values, behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being and compel



us to venture into new behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being, (Aguilar, 2013). Clients have to feel safe enough to share their weaknesses, biases, and deficits without feeling threatened. Coaches are charged with leading non-judgmental conversations and keeping information confidential. They also create a climate that makes the client feel safe enough to share weaknesses and biases without feeling threatened. Clients and coaches have planning conversations, observe one another, co-teach, and problem solve together. The goal is to create a professional development partnership and uncover the root of the issue to ultimately improve instruction. Knight (2007) states, “in coaching relationships, both parties work in partnership to identify what intervention will be implemented, the plan instruction, they observe each other, and they share ideas back and forth in collaboration” (p. 15).

Establishing trust can be a barrier when coaching across the color line. Lack of trust makes the relationship building process painstakingly brutal. “Because people’s race affects how they are perceived to behave, *where* they are reputed to act in a given time period, *how* they are predicted to harm others or not, and *how much* they are predicted to harm others or not, race is a fundamental concept in understanding how and in whom people trust” (Nunnally, 2012). As you search for common ground, your beliefs and biases become exposed and can change the course of how you work with your colleagues for better or for worse. “When dealing with issues of race, educators must become culturally proficient in relationships with students and families of varied racial backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and understandings” (Singleton and Linton, 2006). The same is true when trust is being established among colleagues.

## **Critical Race Theory**

When establishing trust in American institutions there is an element of baggage that comes with it. The political structures and social norms dictate how one should govern their behavior when participating in the institutional structure. The American education system, even at the elementary level, is no different. There are spoken and unspoken rules that dictate what is and is not acceptable. This how things like building culture and norms are established. Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2009) state, “when race comes into the picture, the rules are viewed a little bit differently. Critical Race Theory (CRT) supports the idea that racism is normal and daily occurrence in American society (p. 21). It permeates into all of our structures, systems, and institutions, which makes schools an unsafe place for Black students and employees. With this in mind, the rules for people of color are often more difficult to follow and carry a heavier penalty when broken. For example, it is common, professional practice for all employees of any profession to be on time for work. When a White person is late for work, be it for unforeseen circumstances or individual negligence, it is viewed as an individual problem. Conversely, when a person of color, particularly a Black person, is late for work it is viewed as a representation of all Black people, especially when they are the only one, or one of few Black people in the work environment. In these types of situations, Black people are not afforded the same citizenship rights. Harris-Perry (2011) says, “to be deemed fair, a system must offer its citizens equal opportunities for public recognition, and groups cannot systematically suffer from misrecognition in the

form of stereotype and stigma (p. 37). Thus, when the American education system is viewed through a CRT lens, one could argue that it has not granted people of color citizenship. I will be using CRT as an analytical lens as I explore my role as an IC and build trust among my coworkers.

### **Collegiality and the Race Contract**

Since trust is the cornerstone on which instructional coaching is built, I have had to explore how to build strong and authentic relationships with my clients/colleagues. My strongest attempt at working with my teachers was creating a schedule in which clients got the opportunity to choose when and how frequently I met with them. I gave them a minimum of one hour per week and the options of one solid hour on a reoccurring day of the week or two 30-minute time slots on two different days of the week and a menu of topics to use as the subjects for our meetings. I did this because I could not get teachers to sign up on their own accord to work with me. After getting them on my schedule, I make sure to stick to it to show reliability and consistency. This worked for me in the beginning because teachers were excited about having an extra set of hands in their classroom to assist with teaching lessons, but I was still unable to build relationships or get into the real work of instructional coaching. Teachers would assign menial tasks to me, reschedule meetings, and flat out forget our meeting times especially when it came to discussing strengths and weaknesses in instructional practices. My coworkers did not trust me and did not really view me as their colleague. I had become “colleague less” in this role. According to Tate (2013), “the word colleague implies

equality of standing but when black co-workers step outside of 'the natural state of blackness' into what is still seen as the (white) sphere of influence, they are less than a colleague as well as colleague less (p. 2479).

While there may be some personal preferences and reasons as to why my colleagues dismissed me, we cannot ignore that race may have played an important part in preventing authentic relationships. Shirley Ann Tate (2014) says:

Tolerance asks that we 'make race ordinary' and ignore the working of racism and its affects in the everyday culture of 'the known' meanings into which we are trained as well as where new observations and meanings are tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies that show racists culture as being both traditional and creative in its use of the discourse of tolerance to erase racism. As part of the ordinary processes of societies structured through racial dominance, the racial nomos lies within culture itself. It is the racial nomos that generates everyday taken-for granted meanings of 'race' and the racial contract that keeps these meanings irrefutable through a peculiar wording of the world (p. 2475).

When interacting with my White, female coworkers, I have always felt as if I had to constantly justify my presence. I feel obligated to remind them of my credentials. I feel out of place when I receive backhanded complements about my articulate speech. I feel minimized when my suggestions are shot down by a team of teachers, only for a white colleague to make the same suggestion and it is received with resounding cheers as if a baseball player hit a triple grand slam in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning of the World Series. Essentially, I was a body out of place. Being a body out of place

indicates that there is a right and wrong place for my body to occupy. By simply acting in the role of instructional coach I am stepping out of my place as a Black woman. Having the responsibility and title of 'pseudo supervisor' puts me in an underserved and incorrect position which gives my White colleagues the right to examine my qualities and qualifications to ensure the I am exceptional and, therefore, 'fit' to hold the position. This is phenomenon is stated by Charles Mills (1997):

Both globally and within particular nations, then, white people, Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract, which creates a world in their cultural image, political states, differentially favoring their interests, an economy structured around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral psychology (not just in whites sometimes in nonwhites also) skewed consciously and unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further (p. 40).

The Racial Contract not only endorses my interrogation by my white colleagues, it also supports my exceptionality to be a requirement to occupy white space. This, understandably so, makes relationship building difficult. Nunnally (2012) says, "...people make trust go around, and moving from one's faith in a higher being to connecting with others depends on how people view each other and their relationships" (p. 5). Trust becomes something both parties have to want and work toward. With instructional coaching being a requirement for the school building, one cannot simply opt out of the coaching experiences. Teachers are required to be

coached, at some point, by their instructional coach; which means a minimal level of trust is required. Collegiality is forced upon the coach and client to fulfill their obligatory job duties. In this role, I was squished into a space in which my coworkers felt I did not belong. The trust levels were minimal at best, making effective coaching and collegiality a struggle.

### **The Crooked Room and Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome**

The Crooked Room describes the unusually unique perspective of Black women in American society as it relates to stereotypes and distorted images portrayed in popular culture. Harris-Perry (2011) states, “when they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some Black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (p. 29). In a society that marginalizes Black people and women, the intersection at which Black women live their lives allows us to be double discriminated against (Crenshaw, 1989). This double discrimination is best displayed through the images and narratives created about Black women, which taints the standards in which White people (and others) develop about us. These stereotypes and images, manage to paint Black women in a unique, yet unflattering, light. This can cause us to behave in ways that satisfy the expectations others have for us rather than doing what we feel is right for us mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. These outside expectations typically fit the standard of our White counterparts, which makes us feel obligated to change our appearance, speech patterns, and topics of

conversation when we are in White space. We may also hold back our true feelings, interests, and opinions in fear of not being accepted. Part of this distortion includes three iconic caricatures of Black women: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Mammy is the Black woman who takes care of the children, does the cooking and cleaning, and is the object of no man's desire. She is the maid and the help. She is property and asexual. Her only purpose is to serve white people. "She represented a maternal idea, but not in caring for her own children; her love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for white women and children. Her loyal affection to white men, women, and children was entirely devoid of sexual desire" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 72-73). Conversely, Jezebel is hyper sexualized and is even deemed promiscuous. She is the Black woman who is underdressed, and the object of even man's desire. She is the video vixen in rap videos and "uses what she's got to get what she wants." This stereotype derived from antebellum South as justification for objectifying Black women's bodies during slave auctions. "The myth of Black women as lascivious, seductive, and insatiable was a way of reconciling the forced public exposure and commoditization of Black women's bodies with the Victorian ideals of women's modesty and fragility. The idea that Black women were hypersexual beings created space for white moral superiority by justifying the brutality of Southern white men" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 55). Sapphire, while maintaining "normal sexual standards," was undesirable because she didn't know her place. Sapphire was an angry Black woman with an attitude. She was mean for no apparent reason, emasculated the men around her, and had a chip on her shoulder just for the sake of it. She is steeped in negativity and breathes fire when

she speaks. She is described mildly as sassy and harshly as a bitch. This stereotype is less identified as such because society has engrained in us that any time Black women show some form of emotion, with the exception of crying, that she is angry. The stereotype of angry, mean Black woman goes unnamed not because it is insignificant, but because it is considered an essential characteristic of Black femininity regardless of the other stereotypical roles a Black woman may be accused of occupying (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 88-89). While these three stereotypes play together in every Black woman's psyche, she has to balance them in such a way that she's not showing too much of any one at any given time thus, creating a crooked room. "...Black women carry a double burden as they are asked to uphold ideas of decency build on both racist and sexist foundations. And perhaps now more than ever... this approach to liberation has the potential to harm more than uplift by reinforcing oppressive ideology and constraining the way African-American women live their lives" (Winfrey Harris, 2015). Daily, I balance my strength and vulnerability while keeping up the expectation of the status quo.

While attempting to maintain the status quo, one could hypothesize that the crooked room is a by-product of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). Dr. Joy Degruy (2005) defines PTSS as "a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today (p. 105). It impacts self-esteem, socialization, belief system, and interaction and trust across the color line. As American values are passed down generationally, people pass along their heritage and raise their children to survive in America. Surviving in America



looks different across the color line. While White families pass down privilege, Blacks teach their children how to navigate in spaces that do not belong to them. When the spaces I enter are not created for people like me to succeed, we have to work harder just to be seen as equals. This is even more difficult when put in a position of power, like that of an administrator, or pseudo-supervisor in this case, so I am forced to shift and cope within the confined walls of my crooked room.

### **Shifting and Coping**

As Black women morph themselves into different shapes to fit in their crooked spaces, they are charged with shifting and are forced to cope with their situations. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) thoroughly define shifting in their book entitled *Shifting; The Double Lives of Black Women in America*:

“African-American women change the way they think of things or expectations they have for themselves. Or they alter their outer appearance. They modify their speech. They shift in one direction at work each morning, then in another at home each night. They adjust the way they act in one context after another. They try to cover up their intelligence with one group of friends and do everything possible to prove it with another. They deny their sadness and loneliness. They shift inward, internalizing the searing pain of going out into the world day after day and hitting one wall after the next, solely because they are Black and female” (p. 61).

Shifting is a necessary evil for Black women. When entering a new situation, especially when it is professional, Black women have a fraction of a second to decide

which version of themselves they will present to the people in the room. She quickly assesses the situation and adjusts accordingly. The risk factors are often too high. If a Black woman appears too bossy, she's a Sapphire. If she is overly friendly, she's a Jezebel. If she doesn't say enough, she's Mammy. This dance is a delicate one that is performed on a daily basis, as the workplace is most often the stage.

According to St. Jean and Feagin (2015),

As a group, African American women have always had to work, well before the feminist revolution of the 1960s. Yet in today's workplace the fabricated negative images influence Black women's treatment by both White men and White women and, consequently, Black women's relationships with both groups. Some distortions of the character of African American women are specific to the workplace, but these images are usually informed by the characterizations of the larger society (p. 18-19).

Shifting is a coping strategy to help Black women navigate their spaces. On a very simple level, sifting begins as a level of professionalism. This is something all people have to do. We have to dress professionally (within the parameters of the career/dress code) for work, use Standard American English on the phones and with co-workers, and adjust ourselves to fit the expectations of our company's policies, procedures, and expectations. Shifting (for Black women) takes professionalism to a different level. In addition to the professional standard, Black women have to adjust their normal selves to fit their environment. This may include adjusting her physical appearance, speech patterns and vocabulary, and even masking and hiding her views and beliefs. Black women are charged with the extra

burden of making themselves more palatable for the white people they work with and for in an attempt to avoid becoming a personified stereotype. Shifting is similar to W.E.B. Dubois' idea of double-consciousness. Dubois (1903) defines double-consciousness as, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 9). As Black women fight to be seen and validated in the workplace, we have to anticipate the expectations of our white counterparts and become proactive in combating the contempt and pity. We push ourselves to prove that we are not only worthy of our jobs but also, capable enough to be seen as at least human beings, if not equals. "For Black women in traditionally White workplaces being marginalized and dehumanized is a common experience" (St. Jean and Feagin, 2015, p. 123). There is a fine line between being your authentic self and wearing the metaphorical mask that Black women present to their work world. The more authentic and unapologetically Black women are the more uncomfortable our white counterparts become. The thicker the layers of our mask, the more comfortable our white counterparts become. "They (Black women) say they must shift to conform to codes set by various segments of society, modulating their language, their behavior, even their personal appearance, to make White colleagues feel comfortable..." (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 61). The balancing act becomes more difficult internally as we decide how much of ourselves we are willing to sacrifice to remain satisfied with ourselves while maintaining an appropriate level of professionalism and respect. Black women have to make these critical decisions daily as we interact with the white people around us. We decide at

the blink of an eye how we will present ourselves in any given moment. This instantaneous process is complex yet necessary for the survival of Black women, especially in the workplace. “Dealing with discrimination on a daily basis requires the development of a broad range of coping and countering strategies by all those who are targets for White actions” (St. Jean and Feagin, 2015, p. 126).

### **Self-Care**

Audre Lorde (1988) says, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” The delicate dance of determining when a Black woman can be her true self and when she has to shift into her crooked self can be exhausting. I find myself very lonely as I wonder about in my role to find someone who may understand the intensity of the stress I experience daily. Our constant inventory of our environment is performed in search of safety, security, and risk factors.

In an integrated setting like the workplace, Black women have to play by a different set of rules. bell hooks (2015) describes this concept very clearly:

“...I trace it back, once again, to the survival strategies black folks developed to adjust to living in a white-supremacist context. The reality of racial apartheid was such that most black folks knew that they could never really trust that they would be “safe” in that white-dominated world outside the home or the all-black neighborhood. To gain a sense that they had some control over this situation, they set standards for behavior that were seen as appropriate safeguards. When racial integration happened, black folks did

not immediately disregard these strategies, they adjusted them. One adjustment was the attempt to second-guess what the critical white world might say to disparage ridicule, or mock and to prevent that from happening through self-critique and changing one's behavior accordingly."

These safeguards, coping strategies, and shifting often result in negative self talk as Black women morph themselves into crooked spaces. After a while one's self image becomes distorted, causing our mental state to become the source of great stress and shame, which can eventually turn into physical ailments. "Life-threatening stress has become the normal psychological state for many black women (and men). Much of the stress black people experience is directly related to the way in which systems of domination – racism, sexism, and capitalism, in particular – disrupt our capacities to fully exercise self-determination" (hooks, 2015, p. 40). Facts like this support the notion that Black people are greater health risks as their white counterparts. It is not the presence of melanin that creates the risk it is the tremendous amount of stress that comes with simply living as a Black person that supports this fact. "Many of the ills that plague Black women are lifestyle diseases that may be prevented by self-care. But too often, the expectation that they live up to the strong Black woman myth means women fail to show compassion to themselves" (Winfrey Harris, 2015, p. 103). Black women in particular have the added burden of defending themselves from the above-mentioned stereotypes and creating safe spaces for their bodies as they interact with men. Dealing with these stressors can, at some point, create shame. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) describes shame as having three elements: social, global, and a psychological and physical urge to

withdraw, submit, or appease others (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 104). Stress and shame make it more difficult to fit into our crooked rooms, creates sickness in our bodies, and makes it difficult for Black women to feel good about self-care. “Shame is soothed by responsive interactions that, over time, reduce instances of misrecognition to infrequent anomalies... This intense and repeated shaming without reparation can have lasting consequences for individuals” (Harris-Perry, 2011). In an attempt to remain healthy in mind, body, and spirit, Black women have to employ some self-care techniques.

Many Black women turn to their faith to take care of themselves. Their belief in God, the time we spend in church, and the rituals of prayer have become a staple in the Black community. The church has become a place of solace for Black women in particular (hooks, 2015). The practices, rituals, and traditions are private enough to allow one to practice while at work, while the language (in reference to God and Christianity specifically), is common enough for it to be discussed across the color line. Faith and religion have been a safe haven for Black people forever. “At its core, black theology is predicated on the assertion that God has a unique relationship with African Americans. God is not a passive bystander in human history but rather an active participant in the struggles of oppressed and dispossessed people” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 225). This notion is often shared among Black women in the form of colloquiums like, “everything happens for a reason,” “in God’s timing,” and “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.” None of these phrases are direct quotes from any version of the Bible but they are spoken among groups of Black women all across America as we give each other listening ears, empathetic hears,

and sisterly advice in dealing with our stress and shame. According to Nelson (2011):

“For many Black women, faith is our main coping mechanism to shield u from the adversities of life. Our faith sustains us, gives us strength, and provides us a place of comfort and shelter in a world seemingly gone mad. In fact, there is a growing body of literature that claims African American women are the most likely people across race and gender lines to use religion, spirituality, and their faith as a means of coping with life’s challenges and emotional angst” (p. 147).

Personally, I have found that the Black women in my life also lean on each other for support. We experience the world like no other group of people.

According to Harris-Perry (2011),

“The struggle for recognition is the nexus of human identity and national identity, where much of the most important work of politics occurs. African American women fully embody this struggle. By studying the lives of Black Women, we gain important insight into how citizens yearn for and work toward recognition” (p. 4).

Our shared experiences bring us closer together. As we go to brunch, attend yoga classes, wine tastings, and music festivals, we celebrate our safe world that is only known to us. We stand together in our Black Girl Magic and rejoice in the fact that we are not alone in this struggle. “Black Girl Magic is a movement that gives rise to Black girls and women, honoring their intelligence, beauty, and other achievements they’ve made” (Brock, 2016). Every one of us has a similar story to share about a

boss, co-worker, and/or missed opportunity that brought our Black womanhood into question. In the process of navigating our environments, we share our own coping strategies as we search for the answers to the challenges we face. Through it all we become more familiar and comfortable in our Black womanhood and this is place where we begin to find our joy. As we socialize and fellowship with one another Black women become more conscious of our safe spaces and are able to finally relieve some stress and truly heal. “The key for us as Black women of a new generation is to understand that we must be truly interdependent as well as independent in how we support, love, counsel, admonish, encourage, and care for one another” (Nelson, 2011, p. 244). We begin to get comfortable in our skin as we compliment each other on our style, hair, and aura.

Black women just want a chance at feeling normal. As Winfrey Harris (2015) states,

“Black women are not seeking special treatment – just to be treated as human beings of worth. We are looking for compassion. We are searching for good faith and the benefit of the doubt. We are hoping for relief from twisted images of ourselves and the burden of always having to first disprove what people think they know of us. If society will not give us this – if our communities will not demand this for us... Black women will still be alright” (p. 119).

I feel like self-care has become a path of self-liberation for Black women. As I engage in activities that allow me to take care of my own physical, mental, emotional, and social needs, I feel more comfortable in my skin. In a world that says Black women as they are do not belong, self-care allows me to recharge and prepare



to face an unwelcoming world. In finding balance between strength, fatigue, loneliness, and anger, self-care allows me to prioritize myself. I get the opportunity to be important in my own life, even when the rest of the world disagrees. In an environment full of crooked rooms, self-care prepares me for shape shifting. I prepare mentally and physically for the daily battles I have to fight for visibility, fairness, and justice.

### **Autoethnography**

When looking into a research method, I was immediately drawn to qualitative research. This method was attractive because it was inclusive of cultural phenomenon and how people interact with them. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). My interests lied heavily on my personal experiences as a Black woman as I worked in a predominately White environment and how that impacted me. Merriam (2009) state, “The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 14). Since the focus of my study centered on personal experiences, I searched for a method that supported my goals. Under the umbrella of qualitative research, I found ethnography as a method to best support my goal. Ethnography is a research process, as well as a write up of findings, thus ethnography is both a process and a product focusing on human society and culture

(Merriam, 2009, p. 27).

In reflecting on my experiences and searching for the best way to conduct my research, and understanding that I would be submerged in the experience as both researcher and subject, I found autoethnography to be most fitting.

“Autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (Chang, 2008, p. 43). My research is related to my personal culture as a Black woman as I navigate my pseudo-supervisory role in education.

Autoethnography allows me to tell my stories, reflect on them, and analyze them with the purpose of connecting them to a broader culture (in this case Black womanhood) to find similarities among those belonging to the same culture.

Autoethnography allows me to reflect on my own experiences and examine my own biases. In comparing my experiences to research that has already been done around similar topics, I am able to narrow down the reasons behind some of my negative experiences. I am also able to learn more about my feelings, reactions, and think deeper about how and why things happen in my life. My goal is to learn from these experiences and be transparent enough to prevent others like me from going through the negative things I have. “Personal engagement in autoethnographic stories frequently stirs the self-reflection of listeners, a powerful by-product of this research inquiry” (Chang, 2008, p. 53).

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

In this study, I am exploring the intricacies of my role as an instructional coach and how I believe my colleagues receive me across the color line. I accepted the instructional coaching position to impact students of color on a larger scale, as I had become frustrated with the way they were being treated in the classroom. My goal is to teach teachers how to interact with students of color without discrediting their cultures. I show them students of color are not problem children in their classrooms. I use my position to make the elementary school classroom a culturally safe environment. Instructional coaching is my tool to make a positive impact in the classroom. This study will explore the following research question: In what ways can I, as a Black female instructional coach, protect myself from harm and loneliness in a professional environment?

I will feature counter stories in the next chapter that will further support the claim of my female Blackness becoming the source of my invisibility, hyper-visibility, and loneliness.

This study is an autoethnography. Autoethnographies fall under the category of qualitative research methods. Qualitative research allows one to dive deeper into cultural issue and explore and describe the findings in great detail. Merriam (2009) says,

“The following four characteristics are identified by most as key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is

richly descriptive” (p. 14).

In addition to these qualities, I was interested in exploring issues within the cultural topic of Black womanhood as it related to education. I was interested in exploring this topic deeply because I am a Black woman, I experience difficulties in the field of education as a Black woman, and I had not seen very much literature about the topic. According to Merriam (2009), “Often qualitative researchers undertake a qualitative study because there is a lack of theory or existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon” (p. 15). Writing an autoethnography allows me to analyze my experiences and make sense of them as I compare them to how I interact with others. “Understanding the relationship between self and others is one of the tasks autoethnographers may undertake” (Chang, 2008, p. 29). Using autoethnography as a research method, I will learn more about my experience as an instructional coach while maintaining my cultural identity as I insert myself into potentially harmful environments while making them safer for students. “Autoethnographers use their personal experiences as primary data” (Chang, 2008, p. 49). My autoethnography will include personal stories as my primary data. These stories are accounts of my personal memory of lived experiences. According to Chang (2008),

“Personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past. As an autoethnography, you not only have a privileged access to your past experiences and personal interpretations of those experiences, but also have first-hand discernment of what is relevant to your study. What is

recalled from the past forms the basis of autoethnographic data” (p. 71).

The memories I share are told in narrative form. They are highlighted in chapter 4.

As I explore my role and interactions with my colleagues, I will be using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an analytical lens. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the study of racism and its effects on People of Color (Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings, 2009). It examines how racism bleeds into all aspects of American society, creating oppressive social norms and challenging environments for People of Color. CRT explores White supremacy logic and how White people use their privilege to advance themselves directly and indirectly. White supremacy logic has created a system of oppression in professional, casual, and personal environments, which has had a direct impact on race relations. Race relations deal with the way people treat and think about people of different races. It relates to racial norms, assumptions, stereotypes, and generalizations. Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson Billings (2009) state the following about CRT:

“Critical race theory cannot be understood as an abstract set of ideas or doctrines. Its scholarship is, however marked by a number of specific insights and observations, including society’s acceptance of racism as ordinary, the phenomenon of White’s allowing Black progress when it also promotes their interests (interest convergence), the importance of understanding the historic effects of European colonialism, and the preference of the experiences of oppressed peoples (narrative) over the “objective” opinions of Whites” (p. 4).

These three ideas guide the analyzing of the counter stories provided.

The idea of 'racism as normal' refers to the systems in which America operates. In this dissertation, it specifically refers to the American education system. "Racial inequality and discrimination in matters such as hiring, housing, criminal sentencing, education, and lending are so widespread as to be uninteresting and un concerning to most Whites (Taylor, 2009, p. 5). The cornerstone counter stories will highlight this concept in the situations I have encountered.

The idea of interest conversion comes into play when discussing workplace politics across the color line. As Black women are selected or passed over for positions, the reason behind the choices of White employers comes into question under this idea. "The interests of Blacks in gaining racial equality have been accommodated only when they have converged with the interests of powerful Whites" (Taylor, 2009, p. 5).

CRT also employs the technique of storytelling or narrative (Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings, 2009). Storytelling is the cornerstone for CRT, as it invokes empathy through elicit detail of complex situations while engaging the audience. Due to White supremacy logic, White people have the luxury of ignoring or becoming detached from the hardship and mistreatment of People of Color. "Because Whites thus live in a world they do not understand, their exposure to the viewpoints of people of color can trigger powerful emotions, ranging from denial, anger, and defensiveness to shock, surprise, and sadness" (Taylor, 2009, p. 7). Since racism and discrimination has to be something to "subscribe" to, they often commit racist acts unintentionally. This cycle creates a structure of internalized oppression, paranoia, and mistrust among People of Color. The majority of American scholars

are White men, as American society is of, for any by White men. They do not experience anything that could possibly resemble the oppressive experiences by People of Color they experience every single day of their lives. Storytelling provides people with a peek into the widows of the lives of People of Color. They deliver an experience packed with power, often giving life to unbelievable situations. They provide people with concrete examples, vivid details, and evoke strong emotions in relation to racism. The corner stories shared in this dissertation will illustrate how the research concepts impact me. "Critical race theory scholarship is grounded in a sense of reality that reflects the distinctive experiences of people of color" (Taylor, 2009, p. 8).

During this study I will be reflecting on my interactions between my colleagues and me. I will focus on my emotions and emotional learning around my treatment and my ability to be accepted into their environments. This reflective element will be best supported through the research method of autoethnography. Chang (2008) explains autoethnography as, "A qualitative research method that utilizes ethnographic methods to bring cultural interpretation to the autobiographical data of researchers with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others" (p. 56). This method is fairly new in the field of qualitative research but it allows the researcher to dive deeper into their experiences and culture as they collect data in the dual role of researcher and subject. "The research community is relatively comfortable with the concept of reflexivity, in which the researcher pauses for a moment to think about how his or her presence, standpoint, or characteristics might have influenced the outcome of the research process.

However, new “methods” such as autoethnography, founded on postmodern ideas, challenge the value of token reflection that is often included as a paragraph in an otherwise neutral and objectively presented manuscript” (Wall, 2006). This reflecting and writing not only give the reading an inside point of view of the experiences of the researcher, it also serves as witnessing. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) state the following:

“Writing personal stories thus makes "witnessing" possible (Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) - the ability for participants and readers to observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience (e.g., Greenspan, 1998; Rogers, 2004); writing allows a researcher, an author, to identify other problems that are cloaked in secrecy - e.g., government conspiracy (Goodall, 2006), isolation a person may feel after being diagnosed with an illness (Frank, 1995), and harmful gender norms (Crawley, 2002; Pelias, 2007). As witnesses, autoethnographers not only work with others to validate the meaning of their pain, but also allow participants and readers to feel validated and/or better able to cope with or want to change their circumstances” (p. 280).

Autoethnography as a research method serves as an emotion-invoking tool to make an impact on an industry that may not otherwise be able to understand my point of view.



## Research Design

The purpose of this study is to examine how I am used as an instructional coach and explore how my White colleagues receive me. As I am submerged in the culture I am studying, I am using ethnography as the process and product for research (Merriam, 2009). I am my own subject and only participant.

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, p. 273). I am collecting my data by using a reflective journal and relying on memory as I recall interactions with my colleagues. I am focusing on my feelings, my reactions, and the ability to complete assigned professional tasks. More specifically, my autoethnography will be written in narrative format as I use CRT to ground my corner stone counter stories and to shine light on the struggles of being a Black, female instructional coach. “One purpose of narrative is to redirect the dominant gaze, to make it see from a new point of view what has been there all along” (Taylor, 2009, p. 8). These stories are a collection of memories of incidents which have occurred within my work environment that have impacted me so deeply that they have caused a great shift in my thinking around the education system, my role as an IC, and how educators impact each other and their students. This deep reflection and analyzing of events past guide me in answering my research question.

My primary research question for this study is: In what ways can I, as a Black female instructional coach, protect myself from harm and loneliness in a professional environment?

My recounts of my experience told as counter stories address the research question.

### **Participant/Researcher's Role**

I am the only participant in this study. The stories used in this study are reflections and memories of events that have happened to me. Using autoethnography as a research method permits me to allow myself to take part in my own research. I am acting in the role of participant and researcher. "When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences" (Adams, Ellis, and Bochner, 2011, p. 276).

### **Setting/Site**

I work in a suburban school district in St. Louis County. While the student population is predominately Black, the faculty and staff are predominately White. This school district's student body has undergone a racial transformation over the past 20 years. In the past, the district was predominately White, test scores were high, and the district had a very positive reputation within the Metropolitan St. Louis area. But once No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was ushered in so were the changes. The economy began to decline causes property value to diminish surging White Flight. Black families replaced the White families in the area, local businesses closed down, and resources left the area. Today, the racial breakdown of the

student body is 80% Black, 10% White, and 10% Multi-Racial or other ethnicity. With this racial shift came lower test scores and new challenges, especially for those teachers who have not accepted or did not understand the culture of their new student population. With accreditation always coming into question, administrators sought new and innovative ways to support teachers and students. My position as an IC is a fix for some of this perceived problem. I personally work within the elementary sector. I service the needs of all of the teachers and students between Kindergarten and 6<sup>th</sup> Grade in one school building. Within the building there are approximately 20 students per classroom. On average there are two White students in each classroom. The remaining students are Black or Hispanic. There are two Black general education classroom teachers while all of the other classroom teachers are White. There are other adults in the building that serve in other capacities (ancillary classes, building aides, custodial staff, etc.) but for the sake of this study I am focusing on my interaction with classroom teachers. They are the primary clients receiving support from me as an IC. My reflection on our working together is the core of his study.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Being the researcher and the participant comes with a unique set of biases. I am positioned as the expert and the subject. I have to be very transparent about my thoughts and feeling about the encounters I have with others. I also have to take into consideration my own disposition as I work with others. I am a Black female in my early 30s. I am new to the world of instructional coaching. I have 10 years of

experience in the field of education. I am a new employee in the building in which I work. I am unmarried without children. This sometimes excludes me from connecting with my coworkers, as most of them are married with children. When casual conversation comes up, I am unable to relate and am not taken seriously because I do not have first hand experience in being a wife or mother. I also enjoy hip-hop music and urban pop culture. This gets in the way of connecting with my coworkers because most of them do not listen to the same type of music or even know that the artists, rappers, and celebrities that I identify with exist. Chitchats in the lounge are never around the subjects that I am familiar with and when I inquire about the pop culture they are familiar with, I am met with eye rolls, looks of disbelief, and long explanations that leave me more lost than before I asked for clarification. These ideologies come into consideration as I attempt to build relationships and trust with my colleagues.

### **Ethical Issues**

As mentioned before, this dissertation is a narrative autoethnography. “Narrative ethnographies refer to texts presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, p. 278). The stories and memories I share in this study are true. Those involved are protected through the use of pseudonyms, pronouns, and descriptions. The names of the schools, facilities, and district have all been changed. I have chosen autoethnography as a method to ensure the focus of this study is solely on me. Due to the nature of autoethnographic

work, I know that there is some risk in implicating those close to me.

“Autoethnographers must stay aware of how these protective devices can influence the integrity of their research as well as how their work is interpreted and understood” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, p. 282). I have the responsibility of protecting the identity of those around me while maintaining the integrity of my work. I know all people may not share my opinions, thoughts, or feelings but mine are valuable.

## **CHAPTER 4: CORNERSTONE COUNTER STORIES**

### **Duties, Copies, and Bathrooms: The Role of the Professional Mammy**

As I settled in to my new role as an IC, I sent out a friendly email asking teachers to invite me into their rooms whenever they would like. I made suggestions for my visits, including modeling lessons, co-teaching opportunities, unit planning, and more. I wanted to enter their rooms on their terms, so I would not be viewed as overbearing or intrusive. I wanted to build trust with my teachers and reassure them that I was not evaluating them, and was, in fact, a partner in the educational process. “It is this essential combination of safety, support, encouragement, and forward movement... that allows us to make changes in what we do... (Aguilar, 2013).”

The requests were, initially, nonexistent. I spent many days wandering around the building asking to come in to classrooms. I was often met with tight-lipped, yet polite, “no thank you.” The teachers in my building were very seasoned, with the youngest teacher having ten years under her belt. While they were familiar with the traditional methods of teaching, I wanted to incorporate some new ideas. I wanted to help them become more culturally aware of their students since behaviors seems to bubble up among their Black and Brown students and there were often misunderstandings about culture, causing clashes between teachers and students’ families. I began developing a plan with my building principal, a Black woman, to make better use of my time and to support my co-workers in making connections with their students of color.

My principal and I made a plan to hone in on behavior management and reading instruction as point of entry. Jim Knight mentions, one way to obtain teacher focus is to consider the Big Four issues: behavior, content knowledge, direct instruction, and formative assessment, (Knight, 2007). Our school had adopted a new reading curriculum and it was a great way to incorporate some culturally relevant text into our students' learning. Behavior management was selected to help the teachers connect with their students and their families to make communication easier. These seemed to hit two of the Big Four, so we move forward with our plan. I created a schedule and unveiled my new plan to the teachers at a faculty meeting. This schedule included me working with teachers during at least one plan time per week to give me a better idea of what each grade level was working on and to offer my support and expertise in the planning phase of each reading unit.

With nearly ten years in the field of education, I quickly learned that there is nothing more precious to teachers than their plan time. Plan time is the hour in the school day in which teachers plan their lessons, collaborate with colleagues, make phone calls, make copies, and use the restroom. This time is especially precious in the elementary sector, as they have various subjects to plan for, their students are more reliant on their teachers, due to their age, and they are often only given one per day, as secondary teachers are often given plan time and a separate collaboration time. Knowing this, my new schedule and plan were not well received. Teachers did not want me to infringe on their precious plan time. This posed a challenge for me because I had a job to do and no time to do it.

Looking for some advice, I sought out the assistance of my coaching team. We

met every Friday as a cohort as we learned new coaching skills, collaborated, and planned. It was the one time every week that we got an opportunity to hear from people who were potentially going through similar experiences. During our meetings, we were given time to express our struggles. I shared my difficulty in getting into classrooms and how my role was not being embraced. My team of White coaches looked at me strangely. None of them were experiencing what I was. Many of them made suggestions, some of which I had tried already, like talking to my principal, offer to assist with their planning, and trying to model lessons for them. Ultimately, I could not understand why my experiences did not match those of my White counterparts.

Everything came to a head at our next faculty meeting. As my principal and I explained our thinking around my role, teachers began to express their displeasure for the idea. Frowns covered their faces as I assured them that I was there to help and not evaluate. After our plan was revealed, hands flew into the air. White teachers began explaining that they did not want my help in instructional practices or in discipline; instead they wanted someone to give them frequent bathroom breaks. They wanted someone to make copies and coffee for them. They wanted out of their lunch and recess duties and to have someone to give them more free time. They at least wanted someone to take the struggling students out of their room to help them so the rest of their class could stay on track. I was appalled because my job description and qualifications were far more than what they wanted from me. I thought my teachers wanted a safe person to check in with when they were struggling with new curriculum. I thought they wanted a collaborator to bounce



ideas off of when trying to make their classrooms more comfortable for their students. My teachers were not looking for any of that, instead they were looking for a professional Mammy. They wanted me to take care of the things a teacher's assistant would do, regardless to the fact that I had two masters degrees and plenty of teaching experience. What was worse, after consulting with my White coaching colleagues, I found that my experience was unique because their teachers were not asking them for the same type of favors. I could only draw that this was because I was Black and not seen as a colleague at all. I was less than a citizen in their school and was expected to take my rightful place, below them. Internally, I struggled with the notion of not being valued. I was not being recognized, which negatively impacted how I felt about my effectiveness as a coach. "Craving recognition of one's special, inexchangeable uniqueness is part of the human condition and is only soothed by the opportunity to contribute freely to the public realm, (Harris-Perry, 2011)." I wondered what my setting would look like with a White coach. Nevertheless, I had to learn how to become successful in this position.

I created a schedule for my teachers, forcing my way into their classrooms. It was not received well, but I needed to carve out some space for myself in their classrooms. My job required me to collaborate with them and without this aspect; my own livelihood was on the line. I compromised by not occupying their entire plan time, just 30 minutes of it. I also wrote out a list of expectations, norms, and a weekly agenda, allowing space for their own input. This strategic move showed them that I was serious about my craft and ensured accountability among all parties. Finally, I gave in to a few of their demands. I came around when I had a few spare

moments to give restroom breaks, ran a few copies, and covered a few duties. While this piece felt like selling my soul, it bought me a little bit of trust with my teachers.

As I worked my way through classrooms, some teachers claimed they forgot about our appointments, while others dismissed me with phrases like, “Do whatever you want.” I continued to show up on schedule and provide the services that were expected of me. I maintained an even temper, no matter how much they made me mad. Eventually, the trivial requests minimized. They never fully stopped but their frequency declined. I had to become who they wanted me to be in order to have a seat at their table and gain their trust. I then had to prove myself by not only rising to the standards that they set for me but by exceeding their expectations by showing them I was the coach they needed. I had to remind them of my credentials and my experience. I told them about my success with other teachers and shared my ideas about classroom expectations, curriculum implementation, and unit planning. I felt like I had to go undercover as Mammy to be seen, and then work my way up to become an equal. This is the strategy I chose to be recognized and gain citizenship. “... Black women’s citizenship is shaped by their attempts to navigate a room made brooked by stereotypes that have psychic consequences, (Harris-Perry, 2011).” I had to contort myself to fit into their spaces just to complete my daily job duties. This made work increasing difficulty and mentally taxing. While it took some time, the teachers finally came around, but I had become so lonely and discouraged, that I no longer found real power in my position or enjoyment in my job.

## **Slumber Parties with the Principal**

My school serves predominately Black and Latino families. The staff and faculty is predominately White. When I walk into the building, I immediately feel a cultural disconnect, as I see White culture and values being broadcasted throughout the building. It can be a little uncomfortable. It is especially evident when students express their discomfort. They usually do not know what to call it and have difficulty explaining why they feel the way they do, but it usually comes out as “I don’t want to be here,” and “my teacher doesn’t like me.” I shared those feeling as an IC in this environment. This is nothing new in American public education. Ladson-Billings refers to Swartz’s (1992) concept of master scripting when explaining how White supremacy dominates the educational setting. “This master scripting means stories of African Americans are muted and erased when they challenge dominate culture authority and power, (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This is shown physically in the school environment with the posters of the walls, the themes of the classrooms, and the curriculum and how it is taught. As an IC, I desired to dismantle the ways in which the school and classroom environment negatively impacted students of color by working with their teachers.

Part of my role required me to meet with my principal on a weekly basis to plan our faculty meetings, professional development opportunities, and to analyze data for our district reports. This was a part of my job description and an expectation that was known publicly. I literally sat with my principal, in her office, at her table, with my laptop computer in front of me, as we had conversations. Most of the time, this meeting lasted about 60-90 minutes, depending on how much we had

to discuss. Sometimes, people were invited to sit at the table with us to help the planning process. Other times, it was just the two of us, especially when the resources we needed for the week were all in-house.

After about two months of meeting, our school had a weekend event at a local park. Just by coincidence, my principal and I pulled up to the park, in our own separate cars, at the same time. The parking lot was visible from the area in which the event was taking place, so the attendees could see the cars from where they stood. My principal and I waved to each other and walked over to the party together. Once we reached the attendees, we separated and mingled with the guests. A White teacher waved to me and asked me to come over to her. I did. She asked me, "Did you and the principal come to this party together?" I asked what she meant. She said, "Well, I saw the two of you walk in together, did you ride together too?" I replied, no and explained that we just happened to pull up at the park at the same time. She went on to ask, "Aren't you two in the same sorority?" I told her we were. She persisted, "So what do you two do on the weekends? I know you guys spend a lot of time together at work but I know you must hang out on the weekends, especially since you're in the same sorority." I denied that we spent time together on the weekends. I explained how historically Black sororities and fraternities are spread out throughout the entire world and that there are several chapters in our area. I also explained how members of these sororities and fraternities represent them far beyond their college years and I understood how someone from the outside, looking in, might think otherwise. The teacher laughed it off and said, jokingly, "I just assumed you guys had slumber parties and braided each other's

hair!" She laughed at her own joke as I walked away, dumbfounded.

This was an example of the many microaggressions I experienced on a regular basis at the workplace. Sue et. Al (2007) define microaggressions as follows:

"Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities (p. 271).

This teacher had no idea she offended me, nor did she understand the monolithic stereotype she was projecting upon my principal or me. This microaggression had a way of getting under my skin. I make me develop an attitude about how I was being view by this teacher and her friends. I felt exposed and vulnerable.

This entire line of questioning was confusing to me! How could required weekly meetings and a coincidental arrival time add up to weekend slumber parties in the mind of my co-worker? When White people arrive at similar times, did she ask them if they rode together? I'm sure there were plenty of White women who belonged to the same sorority working side by side, why was it a problem that my principal and I belonged to the same organization? The questions and insinuations were out of control.

There was a part of me that felt obligated to explain myself. I had explained the cultural differences of historically Black sororities and fraternities. I had to remind her that our work meetings were work related and a requirement of my job.

I had to remind her that the principal was my boss, too. I needed to prove my innocence.

There was another part of me that was offended by her allegations. I began to wonder how many White people arrived at similar times? Of those who did, how many did she ask if they spent time together on the weekend? Why was I being questioned, like I had done something wrong? Why did I feel obligated to answer her questions? Why did she feel like she had the right to ask me these types of questions? Overwhelmed with thoughts and feelings, and nervous about how my reactions may be perceived, wished this teacher a good day and walked away.

This interaction highlighted White privilege and how it is a byproduct of the Racial Contract. Peggy McIntosh (1989) says, "Such privilege confers dominance become of one's race..." illustrating why the teacher felt she had the right to question me in the first place. She saw nothing wrong with her actions. What's worse, after replaying the incident in my mind over and over again, I initially did not find anything wrong with providing her with a thorough and valid response. I could have simply walked away, ignored her comments, or called her out on the inappropriateness of her comments. Instead, I maintained my position in the Racial Contract because that was what I was used to. Mills (1997) states,

"...Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract, which creates a world in their cultural image... and a moral psychology (not just in Whites but sometimes in Nonwhites also) skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement an normatively legitimate, and not to be

investigated further” (p. 40).

This situation changed the way I viewed my relationships with my co-workers. It made me paranoid. I did not want to spend too much time with my principal, but she was someone I had to work closely with, regardless to her race. My co-workers did not understand that. They only saw us as two Black women who were spending a lot of time together. I also felt like they discredited my abilities as an IC. This interaction made me think that they believed that I only got my because of what my principal and I had in common. For the record, neither of us knew we were in the same sorority until after I was hired. We did not know much about each other at all until we began working together. We built a healthy, normal working relationship just like we were supposed to. My White co-workers put a strain on that relationship and caused me a lot of mental and emotional stress as I reexamined my interactions with the Black people around me. I knew they were watching me in a way that I was not used to being watched. I had to maintain professionalism and prove myself to a group of people that did not have the professional authority to call for such things. My co-workers became the supervisors I never asked for because of their privilege and position within the Racial Contract.

### **Fighting for Stagnant Mobility: Working Twice as Hard for Half as Much**

After my first year of coaching, my school district decided to change some of the duties of ICs. This change, because of policy, required all of the IC to re-interview for their positions. With this came the possibility of being relocated to another school within the district. As a fairly newer coach, I was a little nervous because I

did not have the seniority that some of my colleagues had; but I was confident that there was a place for me because I had worked so hard to find my place among the teachers in my current school. I had finally proved myself to be of value to them and I was just getting comfortable in my position.

As the re-interviewing process began, I made sure all of my information was updated. I got new reference letters from my past supervisors, updated my resume, and filled out a new online application. I was ready for the process. What I was not prepared for was the blatant attempt to be blackballed.

The interviewing process was pretty standard. There were two rounds; the first one with three building level principals, a union representative, and one district level administrators; the second round was with two district level administrators and a union representative. This process was set up to ensure fairness for the candidates and to ensure that the district's hiring practices were being followed appropriately. I was called two days after I submitted my paper work and was scheduled to have a first round interview the next day.

As I entered the conference room, dressed in my professional attire, hair tied back in neat bun; I took a mental note of who was sitting at the table. There were five people: one White male, one White female, and three Black women. I often, subconsciously, count people (especially Black people) as it impacts my comfort level (I noticed I began doing this the first time I realized that I was the only Black person in the room). I sat down at the head of the table, and began to confidently answer the questions. The team listened intently, as they wrote down my answers, as they smiled and nodded. I walked out of the room feeling confident and relieved.



The next day, I received another phone call stating that I had successfully passed the first round interview and was scheduled for a second round on the following day. I got excited expecting that this would be similar to the previous experience and prepared for the interview.

As I walked in to the waiting area, I was a little more nervous than I expected. Something felt off. When I walked into the conference room, there were only two White women sitting at the table. Both were district level administrators, meaning there was no union representative present. I got even more nervous, because I knew they were breaking protocol, as I was a trained union member and a district level representative. I was afraid to call them out on it because I thought it would hurt my chances of being rehired. I proceeded with the interview as planned, without stating my observation of the missing union representative. As I answered the questions, they listened and wrote down my answers, but there was no smiling or nodding. They looked cold and robotic. They moved through the questions as if they did not want to be there. Once I finished, I thanked them, shook their hands, and strode out of the room. When I got into my car, I cried. I knew they were not going to give me the job.

The next day, I received a call from a Black district level administrator. She was given the task of telling me that I had not been selected to return to my job and that I would be moving back into a classroom teaching position in another building. I asked for some interview feedback and she gave me a few notes. She also told me that all of the coaching positions had not been filled and to reapply once they posted on the website. Throughout the day, I received several phone calls, texts, and emails

from my coaching buddies, asking where I would be placed in the fall, because an email had been sent out district-wide announcing the new coaches for the following school year, many of which were new with no coaching experience. They had all noticed that my name was missing. I was embarrassed, hurt, and confused. I had to pretend that I was okay with the decision and was still afraid to go to someone about the lack of a union representative at the second round interview. The very policy that was supposed to protect me was being used against me.

About a week later, the remaining coaching positions were posted on the website and I submitted my information. I was immediately called back for a first round interview. This time, when I waked into the room I counted five people: four White women, and one Black man. The numbers were right but the ratio of Blacks to Whites was wrong. This round did not go as well as the very first interview, but it was not as bad as the last one and there was a union representative present. I got a call back two days later stating that I would not be moving forward to the next round of interviews. This time, I did not cry. I just prepared for my classroom.

About one month later, two more coaching positions had yet to be filled. They posted on the district website and I hesitantly applied. I was frustrated with the process and was not looking forward to being turned down again. I was called again for a first round interview. I walked into the conference room, for the fourth time, and counted people. There were five: one Black man, two Black Women, and two White women. This was the most diverse group I had sat in front of. This time felt different. They interacted well with each other and with me. They smiled, made eye contact, and gave me immediate feedback. This felt very good.

I was called back the next day for a second round interview. I entered the room and there were three White women, but one of them was a union representative. This interview felt different as well. The people around the table were different from those who were disengaged the first time around. They were fair and asked great follow-up questions. They were not robotic made eye contact when they spoke to me. They smiled. Two days later, I was offered the job. I had to go through twice as much as my White counterparts to get the same job. I had sat in front of interview panels no less than five times as an experienced IC just to get my job back.

This experience was traumatizing, humiliating, and stressful. I later found out that one White female district administrator did not care for me because she thought I asked too many questions. We had a few interactions in the past in which I asked clarifying questions and she thought I was questioning her authority. As a result, she was able to talk badly about me to her White colleagues to keep me from advancing as an IC. Her attempts were successful. I was only let through once a Black female administrator questioned her about me. While I was extremely grateful for the person who stood up for me, I was exhausted and mentally drained by the process I was put through. This woman was a firm believer of the racial contract and did everything in her power to keep me in my rightful place. "Black women experience occurrences like these with regularity-occurrences in which the very act of speaking becomes the focus and the problem, rather than the issue to which Black women's commentary is directed" (Jones and Norwood, 2017). The stereotypes of Black women precede them as they try to make real change. The

structure of the Racial Contract and the stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and the overall Angry Black Woman are assigned to the situation instead of us being viewed as individuals. “Black women know that by speaking up, they risk reinforcing their marginal status within their institution” (Jones and Norwood, 2017). When I learned the news about the White woman administrator who attempted to blackball me, I was not surprised. I was instead saddened and reminded of my place.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

As I reflect on my time as an IC, I know that there may have been some other underlying reasons for my treatment that I deem unfair. I realize that while I have nearly ten years of experience, some teachers are not thrilled about working with someone who is less experienced than them. I also realize that I entered the field earlier than some of my co-workers. Some may have negative feeling about working with someone who is younger than them in the capacity in which an IC has to work with teachers. I also know that many people perceive me to be younger than I really am (some blame it on my height), which adds to the perception of being coaching by someone who is younger. I am also an unmarried woman without children. I cannot connect personally with women on these topics because I have yet to experience them. Many times, people connect casually and socially through conversations and meetings outside of work, like play dates, because I do not participate in this aspect of socializing with my Black or White co-workers it is a missed opportunity for me to get closer to my co-workers, making it difficult to build relationships and potentially gain trust. I also know that sometimes, people just do not like others. My personality may clash with someone else's. I may not be everyone's cup of tea.

What I know is when I watch my co-workers interact with other White teachers, coaches, and administrators that are in similar situations as me (young, unmarried, not yet mothers, and/or short), they are not treated the same way I was. I also know that the people of color with whom I interact are more open and willing to get to know me. I am able to build genuine, trusting relationships with people who have nothing in common with me except for my race. They treat me as an equal,

a real colleague, and they see the value that I can add to their professional and personal lives. We are able to speak to each other without suspicion. There is a fictive kinship that allows us to connect. “The term *fictive kinship* refers to connections between members of a group who are unrelated by blood or marriage but who nonetheless share reciprocal social or economic relationship” (Harris-Perry, 2011). It is one of the reasons why my principal and I were able to get along. While we were not spending time together outside of school, we were able to build trust with each other because we had the shared experience of being treated as outsiders in our own school building. We had to be there to help each other navigate our own crooked rooms.

To every rule, there is always an exception. Not all of the White folks I worked with mistreated me. There were a few that were open-minded in the way they treated the people of color in the building. These people were typically younger liberals who spent a sizable amount of time outside of their workday with other people of color. They were often aware of their White privilege, had a personal connection with people of color, specifically Black and Brown people, which allowed them to be genuinely empathetic to their students, families, and to me. These few teachers were the ones who responded to my emails first. They were the ones who came to my rescue when their colleagues attempted to verbally attack my character. They became my mouthpieces, advocates, and bridges that helped me connect to my teacher population. Real allies were a huge piece of the puzzle when I was trying to get my footing in a White environment. “To be White in America and to be an ally must involve a self-reflexive moment of realization that people of color don’t owe

White people anything” (Yancy, 2008).

“Exposure to these conditions can wear on one’s mental, physical, and emotional health” (Winfrey-Harris, 2015). My daily interaction with the people at work became harmful to me. All of the shifting and coping caused me exhaustion, sadness, and eventually depression. “When we experience an ongoing impending sense of doom, constant anxiety, and worry, stress has invaded our lives and taken over” (hooks, 2015). Despite the unfair treatment, uncomfortable experiences, and racist environment, I have had to learn to push through the hurt, pain, and loneliness to survive.

The first step to healing included allowing myself to actively voice my displeasure in my coworkers in a professional yet direct way. I began calling out the injustices I was experiencing in faculty meetings and in front of my principal. Some of the initial conversations were taken very defensively. My White co-workers were adamantly denying their mistreatment of me. I was only able to change their minds by stating facts and making them empathize with my situation. I told them about the intricacies of my position and gave them factual examples of how I was being turned away from their classrooms. I asked them how they would feel if they were to be asked to babysit their classes, run their copies, and give each other bathroom breaks while being prevented from doing their jobs. I surveyed the building to determine the number of classrooms with closed curtains on their windows and asked them how many of those classrooms they had a problem with. I asked for suggestions for conversing weekly with my principal without giving off the perception of us having slumber parties with each other. Once we came to an agreement that our strategies

were nearly identical, I pointed out to them that the only difference between us was the color of our skin. They soon backed off, understanding that I was implying that their treatment of me could be perceived as racist. I found quite a bit of confidence in this process as I learned to have the courage to speak up about the injustices I was experiencing. I had come to a point of frustration where I knew remaining silent would be worse than any consequence I would face for speaking up, including being fired. I gained a tremendous amount of confidence and learned that while it does not always feel good when confronting difficult issues, in the long run, it is what is best for self-preservation.

On top of having bold conversations about the things that were bothering me, I had to engage in quite a bit of self-care. I began bi-weekly counseling sessions with a Black female therapist. I found it extremely helpful that she was a Black woman because we had some shared experiences and did not have to take extra time out to explain the intricacies of Black womanhood. This allowed us to dive deeper into the healing process and to do it in an open and honest way. We were able to trust each other quickly. We were able to connect over our shared experiences as Black women and find real strategies for relieving stress and anxiety. These included breathing exercises, journaling, and positive affirmations.

To add to my therapist's suggestions, I began listening to podcasts that targeted Black women. Some of these included "Another Round," "Black Girl in Om," and "2 Dope Queens." These provided me with a sense of normalcy as they topics they discussed often touched on the many issues I encountered. I often found myself laughing, crying, and shouting out an agreeable "Amen!" to their broadcasts as I



drove to and from work. Their platforms showed me that there were women like me in the world who were experiencing things like I was and they were finding ways to be unapologetically Black women anyway.

I also spent time with my family and friends in predominately Black spaces. “Living in our own little Black neighborhoods, with schools and churches, in the midst of racism we had places where we could undo much of the psychological madness and havoc wreaked by White supremacy”(hooks, 2015). While hooks is referring to segregated neighborhoods during the era of Jim Crow, these spaces still exist and are needed as White supremacy continues wreaks havoc on Black people everywhere. My family and friends were the people who knew the whole me. I was able to relax, joke, and play with the people who I knew had my best interest at heart. I did not have to shift or cope to be with them. I was not an IC, or Mammy, or an administrator when I was with them. I was just JaNae’. I could make mistakes safely. I did not have to worry about my credentials or if I belonged occupied the same physical space. We watched the same television shows and listened to the same music. We understood each other’s jokes and felt each other’s pain. My room was no longer crooked when I was with the people who loved me.

When I am alone, I spend time decompressing. I sit in my quiet bedroom and cry. I think about new and inventive ways to keep myself calm at work. I listen to music and dance. I exercise. I light candles and incense. I meditate and pray. I veg out on junk food and watch familiar shows from the 90s on Netflix. I travel and go to hip hop concerts and music festivals. I take time to experience the Black things that are viewed as abnormal to White people. As stated in *The Sisters are Alright*, “Black

women also need to be living as we are fighting” (Winfrey Harris, 2015).

Furthermore, as I reflect on these experiences, I write. As I got better at journaling my feelings, I learned that once I got them out of my head and onto paper, I no longer had to be burdened with them. They were no longer allowed to occupy space in my mind. Journaling became therapeutic for me. This is why the autoethnographical format was attractive to me as a writer and researcher, because it gave me permission to turn something therapeutic into academic research. It allowed me to view my negative experiences as precautionary tales for the next Black woman who found herself in a position like mine. “It (autoethnographic writing) is also constructive in a way that you are transformed during the self-analytical process” (Chang, 2008). Through recalling the events of my life and analyzing them through various lenses, I am able to learn more about myself and how I react to systematic oppression.

As I approach my daily interactions as a Black woman in a predominately White environment, I draw on my experiences in my safe spaces. “The workplace is where Black women feel they must shift most often, engaging in a grown-up game of pretend as they change their voices, attitudes, and postures to meet the cultural codes of workaday America as well as the broader societal codes of gender, race, and class” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003). I use my weekends to unload and recharge as I prepare for the week ahead. I have to be intentional about what I do, where I go, and with whom I spend my time because the position I am in becomes so taxing. I not only have to deal with the normal stressors that come with being an educator, I also have to deal with the underlying racism and the criticism that comes

with being a pseudo supervisor or color. I have to become a different, more palatable version of myself so I am not lumped in with what my White co-workers perceive as problematic Black people. I know I have reached my goal once they begin talking to me as if I were not Black. These conversations are typically addressing the political climate of America or a casual conversation about how a family of color has met their low expectations. While they speak casually, they forget that I am Black and say things like, "Not like you," or "Well, you're different." These types of conversations are just as uncomfortable and damaging. They become teachable moments but they still hurt. "Many (Black) women testify to spending several hours a day feeling profoundly disconnected from who they truly are, a loneliness that may remain long past quitting time..." (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003). As I continue my journey in the field of education, I know I will still encounter many situations like I have as an IC. I have learned to be creative in the way I deal with my emotions and feeling about my White co-workers.

As I think about the ways in which I have to be creative in dealing with White people at work, I also wonder how my self-preservation may affect me professionally. Some may feel that I am not as social as their White colleagues because I am uncomfortable sharing my whole Black self with them. I may also miss out on networking opportunities because I do not spend my time outside of work with many White professionals, nor do I typically enjoy doing the things my White co-workers enjoy doing. "On average, Blacks tend to have smaller social networks than their White counterparts" (Ajrouch, Antonucci, and Janevic, 2001). On the occasional chance that I participate in a seemingly White activity, I am still putting

on a performance, as I have to shift to be accepted. This could potentially harm me professionally since many people use their social network to advance professionally. My hope is that I can find a balance between my personal and professional lives in which I can not only be respected and taken seriously, but also, learn to take care of myself in such a way that I do not have to put on a performance just to keep my job.

In the future, I hope to look into the ways in which the crooked room impacts administrators of color. This concept was very prevalent in my life as an IC and I am interested in comparing and contrasting the interactions between White staff members and a Black woman administrator. I know I experienced many struggles as a pseudo supervisor. I wonder how, if at all, the experience would differ when given the title, money, and responsibility. As I interacted with my Black woman principal, we were able to connect on a surface level due to some shared experiences, but we have never discussed how our shared environment impacted us on a personal level. There were times when it felt like my principal was not my boss, but my White co-workers were. I attribute that to her need to navigate her own crooked room. I wonder how our crooked rooms relate, as I do not believe that they are exactly the same.

In addition to exploring the crooked room of Black women administrators, I wonder how the space of a Black woman who does not shift or remain in her place of the racial contract would look. How would her staff treat her as a supervisor (pseudo or official)? What would be the steps she would have to take to create a liberated space for her and how would that impact the students (and teachers) of color with whom she works?

As I continue my work in education, I keep my personal mission at the forefront of everything I do. I got into this profession to help children to become successful adults. As someone who now works with educators, my mission remains the same. If I can change the hearts and minds of the adults who stand in front of children everyday, I know I am reaching children at an exponentially higher rate. My purpose is to serve as a positive Black woman role model to all of the people around me. That means I am relatable to the children and parents I encounter and confront the harsh realities of those who do not truly believe in equality. The self-sacrifice, while difficult, is often worth it in the long run because people's mindsets begin to change. Once someone's mind changes, their heart will follow, and eventually systems will begin to change. As long as I continue to take time to take care of myself, I can continue this work. In the mean time, I hold my head up high and remember, "You don't know me like the sun; you've never seen my horizon." (Bennett, Cole, Segal, and Warner, 2015).

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